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ABSTRACT

Educational institutions need to help women get a better education by taking into account the learning they have acquired through experience in homemaking, volunteer work, and other activities. This paper examines the need for recognition of women's prior learning by educational institutions and delves into some of the intricacies of the process. It begins with the history of recognition of prior learning, showing how experiential learning is really an old concept. Then the paper examines the recognition of adult learners leading to the recognition of women's prior learning in particular, as well as the obstacles encountered. Finally, the paper examines various evaluation methods and some basic principles of this kind of recognition, focusing on the portfolio method. The last section of the paper is a call for action on the part of educational institutions to respond to the need for change in order to fulfill their role of preparing women for the changing world to come. (KC)

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CCLOW Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women
CCPEF Congrès canadien pour la promotion des études chez la femme

WOMEN'S EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING:

HISTORY AND EVALUATION METHODS

by

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Keynote speech presented at the
National Conference: "EDUCATING FOR CHANGE:
Women in the Next Decade"
August 20, 1984

The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
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INTRODUCTION

Since both providers of education and learning places belong to different fields of endeavours, such as volunteer work, community services, homemaking and many other places (Sansregret, 1984), the title of this Conference "Educating for change" suggests that we will need to "Change to Educate".

Thus, as Kathleen Newland, author of the book "Sisterhood of Man" says: "changes in economic and social life throughout the world during the next 25 years will be closely related to changes in the status and roles of women", academic institutions will have to modify their traditional concept of education.

Today's presentation will focus on a change we think the education milieu will have to make to help women get a better education in order to change, while taking into account the learning they have acquired through experience. The subject matter covered here today derives from successful experiences well articulated in the United States. We will be talking about The Recognition of Experiential Learning, or The Recognition of Prior Learning. Upon a return to school, this recognition offers the possibility of receiving official credits for non-traditional learning acquired through life experience.

Since this new challenge in education is one that women would be the first to benefit from, we will therefore try in this presentation to point out the various aspects which will give an overview of the way it works. We will need to look at the various steps that preceded the recognition of women's prior learning since recognizing women's competence will require an objective and official tool for the assessment of their non-traditional learning.

But first, let us begin with the history of recognition of prior learning. We will see how prior learning is really an old concept; then we will examine the recognition of adult learners leading to the recognition of women's prior learning in particular as well as the obstacles encountered. Lastly, we will take a look at various evaluation methods and some basic principles of this kind of recognition, to finally focus on the Portfolio method.

HISTORY

Experiential learning: an old concept

When talking about experiential learning, we refer to an old concept, (Sansregret, 1984) one as old as the world. Since the beginning of time, individuals have learned by trial and error. What we often call "learning by doing" has been integrated into the American university education programs (Keeton and Tate, 1978) since 1830 when Yale decided to have students work in laboratories. At that time, faculty realised the importance of practical work to complement theoretical learning.

Around 1870, John Hopkins allowed medical students to start practical training by visiting patients in hospitals. Later on, in arts programs such as painting and sculpture, faculty observed once again that theory, supplemented by practice, facilitated learning and helped a student further his learning process.

Therefore, we can notice that although experiential learning has always existed, a certain priviledged class of people, i.e. young students who had the opportunity to attend university, broke away from this kind of learning and distinguished themselves by excelling in theoretical learning. However, it is only since 1830, that students, even if only in a few programs, came back to experiential learning.

So, in those years, universities were convinced that experiential learning was of relative importance. But, this conviction existed only for experiential learning acquired in the academic milieu, by young students under the supervision of faculty.

It is only after the end of World War II that people began to understand that adults also learn from various non-supervised experiences. This understanding was due to the fact that the American

soldiers, who during their military service had been doing various jobs with no official recognition, started requesting that their new skills be officially recognized in order to go back to school or to work. We must specify here, that adults in the Armed Forces were very often being trained at college level without ever being credited.

For the first time, the Armed Forces, the State, colleges and universities, community groups as well as business and industry got together in order to find possible ways to recognize these soldiers' experiential learning.

The recognition of experiential learning for adults in general

The rationale that supports the development of methods to recognize prior learning for adults of the military services has served the adult population in general. Since the 70's, institutions have noticed that adults are returning to school in order to achieve new learning objectives. Tough (1977) and Penland (1977) in a research report, point out that approximately 80% of adults enroll in self-directed learning projects or in non-formal learning at one time or another in their life. It is obvious that these new ways of learning without supervision and in a variety of places, also contribute to the development of adults. It will therefore become an obligation to take these new learning processes into consideration. Adults are more and more aware that to be able to cope with the constant changes undergone by society, they will have to consider education as a life-long project.

The growing demand for the recognition of experiential learning is demonstrated by the opening of CAEL "The Cooperative for the Assessment of Experiential Learning" (1974) which recently changed its name to "The Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning". This center located in Columbia, Maryland, is the result of a research project undertaken by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) of Prince-

ton, New Jersey. The financing of CAEL was first guaranteed by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, followed shortly after by the Ford Foundation, the Lilly Endownement and the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education.

Stanley (1980) mentions that in 1980, more than 300 institutions and hundreds of individuals, all members of CAEL, contributed through research toward the improvement of practices which lead to the accreditation of prior learning.

A growing interest in non-traditional education seems to be the turning point which has opened the academic world to this question of recognition of experiential learning. This particular kind of education gets its definition from The Commission on Non-Traditional Study (1973, p. XV) "an education which allows a diversity of learning opportunities offered to an individual, more than the uniform practices, which tend to diminish the importance of time, space and academic prerequisites to the benefit of competence and performance."

The recognition of experiential learning for women in particular

From approximately 1970 in the United States, adults in general can plan new career objectives since receiving credits for the portion of learning related to these objectives is now possible.

Meanwhile, part of the adult population, i.e. women, whose main activities have been to take care of the family, to work as volunteers and to participate in community services, were still kept aside. This type of non-paid work is statistically classifying women as part of the non-active population and is becoming a matter of intensive research. Ruth B. Ekstrom from Educational Testing Service (E.T.S.), of Princeton (N.J.) is one of the researchers who has contributed the most to develop assessment methods for this type of learning. For homemaking

and volunteer work only, thirty-four (34) research reports and articles have been published by a variety of authors to help women catch up as quickly as possible and get recognition for this prior learning (Sansregret, 1983). Different research projects have created programs to recognize women's prior learning: "Project HAVE Skills" (Ekstrom, R.B. Project HAVE Skills - A Program to Help Women Find Jobs Using Their Homemaking and Volunteer Work Skills, Princeton, N.J.: Educational Testing Service, 1981), project "ACCESS" (Ekstrom, Ruth B. Credentialing Women's Life Experiences (Project ACCESS). Final Technical Report. Educational Testing Service, Princeton, NJ, 1981) and others.

At the present time, women in the United States constitute the fastest growing student clientele and many of them are returning to school intending to apply for a job once their education is completed. (Ekstrom, 1981).

Obstacles

Before taking a look at the various recognition methods, we must understand the obstacles that create barriers to this assessment. Thus Eliason (1977) contends that:

When a woman wishes to return to school, she not only faces the age barrier but also sexist stereotypes and beliefs that homemaking and volunteer work have little market value and little recognition as far as course and job equivalences.

Ekstrom (1981b) identifies six obstacles to the recognition of women's non paid work when returning to school:

1. Identification: the woman herself, or the vocational educator, may not recognize that an activity has been a learning experience in which new skills and knowledge are acquired.

2. Articulation: women and vocational educators may not be able to see the relationship between skills acquired through experiential learning and those taught in a vocational education program.

3. Assessment: even when vocational educators agree that women's life experience learning has resulted in relevant skills, formal recognition of these skills may not occur because of problems in assessing and credentialing life experience learning.

4. Knowledge gaps: because prior experience learning is not systematically organized, the knowledge acquired may not cover all the topics taught in a vocational education program.

5. Financial: some vocational education institutions do not give credit for life experience learning because they are concerned about the loss of tuition income or because state financial reimbursement policies do not provide for such payments.

6. Beliefs: Some vocational educators worry that if they accept life experience learning, it will result in lower standards or the admission of individuals unable to perform well in the program. They may also think that adult women will not perform well in vocational education programs.

METHODS OF RECOGNITION

So far, we have observed that soldiers have been the first to benefit from a system recognizing prior learning and that later on adults in general, i.e. those whose main activity is to hold a paid job, are beginning to request and are actually granted such credits for prior learning.

It is only from around 1974 that women whose primary occupations were homemaking, volunteer work and community service, come to receive credits for a learning acquired through non-paid work.

Since the title of this conference is Educating for Change, we will try to elaborate and unsderstand what, academically speaking, experiential learning means.

Experiential learning has been defined as "learning in which the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied. It is contrasted with learning in which the learner only reads about, hears about, talks about, or writes about these realities but never comes in contact with them as part of the learning process" (Keeton & Tate; 1978).

Thus experiential learning usually occurs outside of the classroom although as Stanley (1980) has pointed out, "the classroom also provides experiential settings." Regardless of where learning occurs, it is considered experiential if the person has learned by carrying out actions in a work, leisure or family setting; seeing the effects of those actions, arriving at an understanding of a general principle; and applying this principle in new circumstances (Coleman; 1976).

The two major forms of experiential learning are:

- Sponsored experiential learning such as field work and internships, which takes place away from the classroom but is planned and/or supervised by a faculty member; and,

- Prior experiential learning, which includes both intentional learning, such as self-directed study or non-credit courses, and incidental learning, from paid or unpaid work as well as other life experiences (Ekstrom, 1983).

When adults enter or return to college, they often discover that they know some of the things that are relevant for their educational goals or that would enable them to meet institutional requirements. They may then seek recognition of their prior experience learning. To recognize prior learning means "to give from a proof of evidence, official recognition for knowledge acquired through means other than formal courses of study" (Sansregret, 1983).

Some principles

Such an approach in education cannot be envisioned without basic principles to rely on. One of those basic principles is to give credit where credit is due in relation with specific courses and programs by highly competent people who use a tested scientific approach.

- To give credit only where credit is due means to screen, from the variety of skills a person acquired, those which relate to her educational objectives. Thus the portion of skills not credited can be kept aside for different projects that can be built up later on and that require these skills.

A clarification is in order here: a woman could ask credits for learning acquired through homemaking and volunteer work if she can prove what she has learned from that work and only if this learning relates to the program she wants to register in.

To give academic credit for prior learning calls for rigorous professionalism from institutions and for a control of quality, applied to the assessment of learning, otherwise this method would harm women's status and deprive them of the recognition of their deepest value. It is not for giving birth to two or ten children or for having worked during five years as volunteer in her community that a woman will request credits, but it is for the mastery of specific skills in relation to courses and programs.

- Highly qualified people are assigned to programs of assessment of prior learning in the United States. Educators of adults had to get additional competence in order to fulfill their new role of professor and assessor of prior learning, since Klemp (1979) mentions "Teaching and Assessing competence can be different from teaching and assessing abilities coming from academic courses." Workshops, seminars and weeks of studies are now offered by the CAEL to administrators, faculty and professionals from colleges and universities. New careers in education have been created in the United States. Thus, counselors, mentors and tutors are assigned to these programs, and assessing teams are constituted of faculty members who are known as "experts" in the field of evaluation along with professionals in adult education, when needed, "experts" from the outside are invited, and confidentiality is assured.

- The need to have rigorous scientific methods has brought the development of a battery of new standardized tests for the majority of occupations.

Methods generally in use

We will now take a look at methods generally in use in the United States. There are three major ways to evaluate prior learning:

- Tests, including both standardized tests specifically designed for the assessment of prior learning and faculty-made (non-standardized) tests;

- Credit recommendation for courses offered by business, industry community groups and voluntary organizations.

- Individualized assessment, using portfolio assessment, interviews, demonstration or other techniques that enable an individual to show what he has learned and is able to do.

Each method has its advantages and disadvantages. Tests, which are the most widely used form of assessment for prior learning, seem best suited for assessing intentional learning, such as self-directed study. Standardized tests provide a means of comparing students. Credit recommendations provide a quick and easy way of recognizing the learning in non-credit courses; however, it is the course not the learner that is evaluated. The portfolio method, which was developed for assessment of prior incidental learning, offers the greatest flexibility.

A variety of materials are available to help colleges assess prior experience learning. The Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning (CAEL) has the most extensive group of publications in this field. These include materials by Willingham (1977) on how to prepare a portfolio and materials by Knapp (1977) on helping the returning student. A "typical institutional process" for assessing prior learning is described in Stanley (1980), and Sansregret (1983) presents a synthesis of different models, practices and assessment tools which are, or soon will be, in use.

But when it is time to evaluate women's skills from homemaking and volunteer work, individual assessment, i.e. the development of a portfolio remains the best way to give credit. It is now relevant to talk about this method.

THE PORTFOLIO

First of all, we will have to define what is a Portfolio.

Definitions of Portfolio

According to Rydell and Irwin (1982), a portfolio is a tangible document that typically contains the following information:

1) A statement of the person's goals, both personal and educational,

2) Clear statement of the knowledge and skills to the person's goals and educational program, and

3) Evidence that substantiate the person's claim to learning.

These authors insist on the fact that:

1) The learning must be measurable.

2) The learning must have both a theoretical and an applied component.

3) The learning must be college or university level.

4) The learning must be applicable outside the specific context in which it was learned and must serve as a base for further learning.

5) The learning must be relatively current.

6) The learning must show some relationship to the person's degree goal.

Development of a Portfolio

The development of the Portfolio is done under the supervision of a counselor who is in general a professional in adult education. For this purpose, the majority of institutions offer a credit course on the development of the portfolio. Rydell and Irwin (1982) observe that due to several steps in this process, candidates need assistance in order to identify, describe and transfer skills and knowledge acquired outside the academic milieu. The development of the Portfolio also includes traditional learning that is officially recognized through transcripts and diplomas from colleges and universities (Sansregret; 1984).

Once completed, the portfolio is presented to a jury of experts, i.e. the faculty members known in the specific field to be evaluated. The program of assessment of prior learning is under the responsibility of a program director, who reports to the academic dean.

In some institutions such as Goddard College in Vermont, candidates must have completed a semester of regular courses before asking to develop a Portfolio. Also, they must have completed a second semester before receiving credits for their learning acquired prior to their enrollment.

Vermont State College will assess learning after one semester completed. At Goddard the development of the portfolio can be done to complete a Bachelor's degree, but never for a master's.

Nature of the learning to be credited in the portfolio

When talking about recognition of learning we mean to recognize non-formal learning that must have a link with courses in a program. We talk about learning that is mastered and that can be proved.

It is important to understand tnat learning which is repetitive and follows a routine such as cleaning the house, preparing meals or driving a car, are not considered activities of college level.

In order to better understand this procedure of recognition, we will study some examples. Let us take the case of a mother who is excellent in planning menus, balancing them according to dietetic prescriptions because she has done valuable research in this domain, attended conferences and seminars, because she has written reports and built up a considerable file on the subject. In addition to that she has been working for four years as volunteer to plan menus for a senior citizens' home, taking into account their age, sedentary occupations etc. This woman decided to register in a bachelor's degree in nutrition, and from her past experience she requested the development of a portfolio. She will submit herself to tests, interviews ans simulations about the courses that have the closest links with her skills. A jury of experts will determine the number of credits she deserves and the counselor will build with her a learning contract or educational program with courses she still needs to get her B.Sc.

To give women credit for learning means for learning they have mastered.

Thus, let us repeat again that it is not to give birth to two or ten children that must be evaluated, but the portion of learning equivalent to a level of specific courses or programs.

Another example is the one involving two mothers:

- one has raised two children
- the other raised ten children.

In the recognition of experiential learning, it is not the number of children that will be evaluated, but the skills acquired when performing these tasks. Looking at these two situations, one can think that the

mother who has two children had maybe dedicated some of her time to supervise their homework, took active part in parents' committees, writing reports intended for the Ministry of Education, done public relations in volunteer work, etc. But when looking at the mother with 10 children, one can think that she has developed administrative skills in budgeting, leadership skills in managing her "team" of children, in delegating tasks, etc. If both mothers want to register in the same program of education they could receive credits for different courses because they each have mastered different skills.

To make sure that we have a good understanding of the nature of learning to be credited, we will look at a woman who worked for her husband:

Married for twelve years, this woman who has two children and is assisted by a babysitter for the care of the children has been working for her husband's engineering firm since the beginning of her marriage. She makes estimates, prepares tenders, does bookkeeping, public relations, hires the staff, and prepares income tax returns. In other words, if she would stop working, her husband would have to hire a competent replacement. After these twelve years of work, she decided to go back to school and wanted her experience recognized for credits in a program of administration.

The fact that she had two children as such is not a criteria to study in administration and the twelve years of experience are not relevant as to their number. Rather, it will be the skills she has acquired in working for this engineering firm that she will demonstrate in the development of the portfolio.

Advantages

For a certain number of years now, academ' institutions, for different reasons (financial, democratic and others), have opened their doors to all, and often without any control over the ability of a person to study.

Unfortunately and too often adults for different purposes (job promotion, need to adapt to change, retraining, etc) register in courses that lead nowhere, or in other cases are a duplication of learning. Poorly oriented, adults waste time and money and too often their motivation to learn.

In addition to these problems, women are more penalized due to the fact that specific problems occur because academic institutions and the labor market do not have the means to help these women make a normal transition from homemaking to professional life (Sansregret, Ekstrom, 1984).

Educational institutions, and especially universities are a place of reflection, a place of high-learning whose objective is excellence. Upon assessing prior learning through serious and controlled demonstration of the skills acquired, the institutions could find a way to welcome a clientele often better prepared and highly motivated to study, a clientele made for the most part of competent women.

To recognize prior learning helps "position" an adult at the level of his real competence.

In a document published by the Economic Council of Canada, Women and the Labour Market: An Analytical Framework by Boulet and Lavallée (1981), the authors mention (p.8) "that being a woman sharply reduces the probability of undertaking advanced studies ... and the higher the

level of qualification, the lower the proportion of women. This is based on the assumption that women are more likely than men to interrupt their participation in the labour market, having a shorter period to enjoy those benefits ...".

Following these authors' observations, we can envision that if women have their non-formal learning recognized, those who want to bring up their children themselves or/and do volunteer work could do so. Since the place to learn is not necessarily a school, a woman who wants to continue to learn, could do so in building up with the help of a counselor a learning contract. She could follow courses in an out of the classrooms, undertake independent studies that have a link with an academic program or a tailor-made program.

This way she could dedicate time to what she considers a priority for the time being and continue to learn in order to adapt and cope with changes.

Because more and more women want to return eventually to work, the labour market could benefit from the arrival of better prepared women and academically recognized whose contribution is absolutely important for a society in transition.

Of course, it will be important to evaluate the cost of such a system. Different financing methods have been tried in the United States, including a contribution from the students. This contribution has been quite well received by the majority of students, since the recognition of prior learning saves them time and money.

CONCLUSION

To conclude this presentation, we would suggest to academic institutions, be it high school, college or university to study as soon as possible the dossier to recognize prior learning.

Thus, instead of admitting adults on the basis of their age or social pressure that wants school opened to all without adequate screening, these instituions could, from programs of assessment of prior learning, register students from the proof of evidence they can undertake a program of study. Adults and women in particular, who have done homemaking and community work should not be required to take courses meant to bring about learning they have already acquired. If we are to provide social justice and fairness, we must acknowledge learning that comes from all aspects of life, not simply the learning that comes from the classroom (Sansregret, Ekstrom, 1984).

A synthesis of a speech that the Director of University of Montreal addressed to the colloque of the Unions of Teachers has been published in the Montreal La Presse of August 5, 1984. In his speech, Me Lacoste talks about the state of anxiety prevailing in the university right now. He recalls that "certain principles should inspire the development of graduate education, for example, the necessity to rely on what's already acquired, on experience, on the ability to develop what has already been demonstrated instead of adding up on costs even with the best of intentions". (Free translation)

When considering the subject matter of Me Lacoste, we give ourselves the latitude to adapt and make a link between his thoughts and the principles we defend.

We think that in a perspective of EDUCATING FOR CHANGE, it is urgent that the different levels of education act in concert to study the possibility to implement programs for the assessment of prior learning.

We wish and this is also for the benefit of women, that new alliances between academic milieux and the labour market be contracted, inviting economists to join in because their expertise will be necessary.

We suggest that this new challenge will of course call for change in the mentalities. But when reading the book We Walked Very Warily: A History of Women at McGill (Margaret Gillett), telling the progress of change within a university, we can certainly hope that academic institutions will want to take into account prior learning in order to educate women for change.

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